
Strawsonian Critique of Entitlement

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I. Introduction

Regardless of the moral standards to which we ascribe, nearly all of us find it perfectly natural to judge one another by the moral content of actions—praising those who act in accordance with what we deem to be “moral” and blaming those who violate these notions. Most of us believe, moreover, that one is entitled to enjoy the fruits of his labor, and that the property which one has earned should therefore receive governmental protection. As we shall see, however, Galen Strawson calls much of these intuitions into question in his work, entitled “The Impossibility of Moral Responsibility.” Specifically, Strawson proposes an argument that “appears to prove that we cannot be truly or ultimately morally responsible for our actions.”¹ I believe that Strawson’s reasoning poses a significant challenge to those who believe we are justified in blaming and praising others. This challenge remains compelling regardless of the truth of determinism and raises serious doubts about the common moral beliefs associated with property rights, as exemplified in Robert Nozick’s Entitlement Theory.

II. The Basic Argument

In order to evaluate the idea that moral responsibility is impossible, we must first begin with what Strawson refers to as the “Basic Argument.”

According to this argument, when we refer to an action as being free, we are referring to an action that is performed for a reason, as opposed to one performed out of reflex or habit. When one acts for a particular reason, one’s action is a function of “how one is, mentally speaking.”² To be responsible for an action, then, one must have “consciously and explicitly chosen to be the way one is, mentally speaking, in certain respects, and one must have succeeded in bringing it about that one is that way.”³ Therefore, responsibility derives from a person’s choice to be or act in a certain way and his ability to act in the way he has decided upon. For one to choose to be the way one is, mentally speaking, however, this person must already exist with certain principles of choice “in the light of which one chooses how to be.”⁴ The idea of responsibility presumes that individuals are able to choose how they are, mentally speaking. Furthermore, this idea implies that to be responsible for such a choice, one must be responsible for the principles according to which the choice was made. For one to be truly responsible for these principles, however, one must have chosen *them* according to another set of principles. As this line of reasoning suggests, moral responsibility leads to an infinite regression. Strawson therefore concludes, “true self-determination is impossible because it requires

the actual completion of an infinite series of choices of principles of choice. So true moral responsibility is impossible.”⁵

In order to clarify Strawson’s reasoning, it is useful to present an example that reveals the argument’s force. Consider my decision to help a friend in distress. When analyzing such a decision, we would ultimately point to the type of person that I am and the desires that I hold in explaining why I made this decision. Yet this seems to imply that if I am to be truly responsible (and thus worthy of praise) for helping my friend, then I must be truly responsible for the type of person that I am and the desires I hold. In turn, if I am to be responsible for the type of person that I am and the desires that I hold, then I must have decided at some point in my life to be this type of person and hold these desires. To be responsible for this decision, however, I must be responsible for the principles and desires in light of which it was made, and I can only be responsible for these principles and desires if I chose them based on other principles and desires, and so on. In the end, we are led to principles and desires that I attained at birth and for which I cannot possibly be held morally responsible.

In order to better understand this last point, I believe it is useful to frame Strawson’s argument in psychological terms. I was born with biological features over which I had no control and into circumstances over which I had no control. At

some point in my life, I reached an age at which I was able to make my first rational decision. Yet I had nothing on which to base this decision except principles that were themselves founded upon my biological features, as well as the past experiences over which I had no control. With these considerations in mind, it is difficult to see how I could be held morally responsible for this particular decision. Moreover, after making this first decision, I observed the consequences and added the experience to my previous stock of knowledge about the world. When presented with a second opportunity to make a rational decision, therefore, I had only my biology, the past experiences over which I had no control, and the consequences of my first decision to guide my choice. Again, insofar as this second decision could be based only on principles and circumstances over which I did not have control, it does not seem I can be held morally responsible for this decision either. As this line of reasoning suggests, it is unclear where to locate source of moral responsibility; every decision I have ever made can be traced back to the circumstances and biological features of my infancy.

One might object, however, that the situation as described is clearly one in which the world is causally deterministic (i.e. in which each person’s life unfolds inevitably such that no one ever possesses the freedom to act otherwise than he in fact does). After all, I seem to be suggesting – and indeed, Strawson seems to be suggesting – that

any human being born with my exact biological features into the exact circumstances in which I was born would inevitably make the same choices I have made. Yet even if the world were indeterministic, it is not clear that this fact would damage the validity of Strawson's claims. In fact, let us assume that the world is indeterministic such that when faced with very difficult moral decisions, "there is a tension and uncertainty in our minds...which are reflected in appropriate regions of our brains by movement away from thermodynamic equilibrium – in short, a kind of stirring up of chaos in the brain that makes it sensitive to micro-indeterminacies at the neuronal level."⁶ Multiple neural networks, in other words, are activated when we are presented with conflicting options in times of difficulty. Because we place approximately equal value on each option, however, it is not certain which neural network will prevail. Rather, the decision that we ultimately make is dependent upon undetermined quantum processes at the neural level.

Even if the world were indeterministic in the manner described, it is not clear how this fact would legitimize the concept of moral responsibility. Indeed, if my decision to help a friend in distress rather than ignore him was the result not of a conscious decision on my part, but rather of undetermined neural processes over which I did not have control, it is difficult to see

how I can possibly deserve praise for my decision. As Strawson asks, "how can the occurrence of partly random or indeterministic events contribute in any way to one's being truly morally responsible either for one's actions or for one's character?"⁷

At this point, we must admit the possibility that society would not – or perhaps even could not – take seriously the idea that moral responsibility is an illusory concept. In fact, we may *accept* Strawson's conclusion while nevertheless maintaining that we are justified in morally praising and blaming others purely for utilitarian or other practical reasons. This possibility, however, does not diminish the strength of the Strawson's argument. As we shall see, moreover, there seems to be a significant sense in which this argument undermines the moral foundations of property rights as typified by Robert Nozick's Entitlement Theory.

III. The Entitlement Theory

In defining his own theory of distributive justice, Nozick suggests that a particular distribution is just if everyone is entitled to the holdings they possess, and entitlements are valid only when acquired through just means. In order to be just, therefore, an original distribution must first adhere to principles that define the fair appropriation of unheld things. Moreover, whatever arises from a just situation and then acquired through just means must itself be just. Thus, for Nozick, any subsequent (*non-original*) distribution is just only

if it develops from another just distribution through legitimate means.

Nozick admits that many distributions are not generated in accordance with the two principles of fair acquisition and fair transfer mentioned above. For this reason, he finds it necessary to include within his Entitlement Theory a principle that defines how instances of past injustice may be rectified. This principle of rectification uses historical information about previous situations and the injustices done in order to determine what would have occurred had these injustices not taken place. Ultimately, correcting past injustice means restoring society to the distribution of holdings that should exist according to Nozick's first two principles. As Nozick asserts, "the entitlement theory of justice in distribution is *historical*; whether a distribution is just depends upon how it came about. In contrast, *current time-slice principles* of justice hold that the justice of a distribution is determined by how things are distributed (who has what) as judged by some *structural* principle(s) of just distribution."⁸ Thus, while many theories of distributive justice – the theory of John Rawls, for instance – seek to determine the legitimacy of a particular distribution by comparing this distribution to the ideal pattern defined in the theory, Nozick's Entitlement Theory is concerned merely with historical facts: if each person attained his resources in a just way, then the distribution in question must surely be just.

Admittedly, the idea that each individual is entitled to that which he acquires through just means is appealing, especially in the context of capitalism. However, if we were to adopt the historical approach that Nozick's theory recommends, we would first need to determine the fair appropriation of unheld things in society.⁹ In addressing this point, Nozick first considers the theory of acquisition proposed by John Locke. Locke defined just acquisition of property as applying one's labor to an unowned object. For Locke, in other words, one takes ownership of an object by using that object in a productive way; this moral right of ownership is then concretized through legal recognition. As Nozick contends, however, Locke's account "gives rise to many questions," and the most of important of these involves "whether appropriation of an unowned object worsens the situation of others."¹⁰

According to Nozick's Entitlement Theory, a particular distribution is just only if property is acquired and transferred through just means. One might reasonably argue that if a particular act of appropriation significantly weakens the situation of others, then such an act may in fact be unjust. Because condemnation of methods of acquisition based on the ways in which the acquisition negatively affects other members of society can lead to impractical situations in which citizens are never able to acquire anything, Nozick must define a workable boundary between those negative

effects that justice can tolerate and those that render acts of appropriation unjust.

Locke defines the boundary by declaring that acts of appropriation are just as long as there are enough goods left for others to enjoy. As Nozick contends, however, the situation may not be as straightforward as Locke's account seems to suggest. After all, "someone may be made worse off by another's appropriation in two ways: first, by losing the opportunity to improve his situation by a particular appropriation or any one; and second, by no longer being able to use freely (without appropriation) what he previously could."¹¹ According to Nozick, requiring that one's act of appropriation not deprive others of the ability to *appropriate* is too stringent a condition, as it would ultimately make any theory of property rights virtually untenable (appropriating and thus taking ownership of a particular good must by definition deprive others of the ability to appropriate and take ownership of the good themselves). Nozick does admit, however, that any adequate theory of justice of acquisition should contain a provision that prohibits the individual from completely depriving others of the ability to use freely what they previously could. With respect to affecting others, therefore, an act of appropriation is unjust only if this act completely deprives others of uses which they had previously enjoyed; so long as there remains some amount of the appropriated resource for others to *use*, one's

act of appropriation cannot be deemed unjust, even if this act has foreclosed the possibility of others *appropriating* that resource.

Having thus drawn the boundary between just and unjust acts of appropriation with respect to the negative effects that these acts have upon others, it remains for Nozick to define exactly how it is possible for one to appropriate goods within a modern world in which most goods and resources are not unowned in the Lockean state-of-nature sense. Ultimately, Nozick does not address this question directly. However, based on his commitment to the free market and his characterization of Locke, it seems reasonable to conclude that Nozick believes one is justly entitled to that which he has earned through his own skill and resourcefulness. This view seems to coincide with many of our own capitalist intuitions, and although we may not be able to directly "mix our labor" with previously unowned goods, it seems reasonable to maintain that one is entitled to own what he has created through his own laborious efforts.

IV. Strawson and Entitlement

In sum, therefore, Nozick seems to believe that one is entitled to own those goods whose value he has created through his own skill and resourcefulness, so long as this appropriation does not completely deprive others of the ability to use and benefit from the goods in question. Yet, in

returning to the Strawsonian argument with which we began, there seems to exist a fundamental tension between the belief that one deserves to enjoy the benefits of his labor and the idea that we cannot be held morally responsible for our actions. Can we consistently maintain that one should be entitled to own that which he has acquired through his own resourcefulness, while nevertheless absolving this person of moral praise or blame for the decisions he has made?

In my opinion, the following example suggests that the answer to this question is no. Let us consider the life of Microsoft founder Bill Gates, and for the sake of argument, let us assume that he has acquired his wealth through just means, such that he is entitled to this wealth according to Nozick's theory. In defending the notion that Gates deserves to keep that which he has earned, one would likely point to the fact that he has created his millions through his own skill and resourcefulness. Before granting that Gates is entitled to these earnings, however, let us also consider the possibility that someone possessing the same degree of skill and resourcefulness as Gates – we might think of this person as an exact clone of Gates at birth – was born into a poor family one hundred years prior to the birth of Gates himself. Let us also assume (quite reasonably, I believe, considering that Gates' access to modern technology has clearly been instrumental in his success) that the circumstances of this person's

birth prevented him from ever achieving a level of wealth beyond that which was needed to ensure his survival.

Can we possibly maintain that Gates deserves his wealth and that this person deserves his poverty, even though the two were born with identical skills and levels of resourcefulness? As I believe this example reveals, Gates' success has largely been a matter of historical accident: while his hard work and resourcefulness have certainly played an important role in his success, the circumstances into which he was born were crucial in allowing him to prosper. Moreover, the resourcefulness that Gates has displayed is a skill – like any other skill or personality trait – which can be traced back to the circumstances and biological features of his infancy in Strawsonian terms. Ultimately, therefore, the source of Gates' moral entitlement is unclear: there seems to be little reason to believe that he *deserves* to keep what he has earned simply because he was fortunate enough to be born with traits, which led him to become resourceful, and into circumstances favorable to resourcefulness.¹²

At this point, one might object that I am oversimplifying the example by attempting to equate that which one has earned through skill with that which one acquires through pure luck or chance. In order to decide whether or not skill is collapsible into luck as I have suggested, therefore, let us turn to consider a challenge to

Strawson's theory offered by Daniel Dennett. In analyzing freedom, Dennett considers whether "it is 'just luck' that some of us were born with enough artistic talent, in effect, to have developed 'good' characters while some of us have turned out less well."¹³ As we have seen, Strawson appears to answer this question affirmatively. Ultimately, however, Dennett seeks to restore the legitimacy of moral responsibility by drawing an important distinction between luck and skill. According to Dennett, "some talented performers are made, not born; some have diligently trained for hours every day for years on end to achieve their prowess." Counting himself among the individuals belonging to this category, Dennett suggests that "we gifted ones are good at deliberation and self-control, and so we expect a good deal of each other in these regards."¹⁴ For Dennett, in other words, most people obtain the ability to question and revise their principles at some point in their lives, and this ability justifies the rest of us in ascribing moral praise and blame to those who possess it. Thus, while moral responsibility may not apply to infants and those individuals that never acquire the ability to question their own values, it *does* make sense to hold people responsible for rational actions committed in light of principles that these individuals have had the opportunity to question and revise.

At first glance, it may seem as though Dennett's account adequately justifies our penchant for

praising and blaming others. Admittedly, there does seem to exist a very important distinction between mere luck on the one hand, and skill obtained through hard work and careful deliberation on the other. The importance of this distinction, however, cannot withstand the regression outlined above towards which moral responsibility inevitably leads us. Let us admit that most human beings do in fact reach a level of maturity that allows them to question and revise the principles according to which they act. The question nevertheless remains how such an individual can be held morally responsible for having the good fortune – or perhaps the bad fortune, insofar as he or she may receive moral blame for actions that might otherwise be excusable – to be born with the capacity to eventually reach this level. Put in Strawson's terms, if one is to be held responsible for the decision to examine one's own values, then he must be held responsible for the principles according to which this decision was made. Yet one can only be responsible for these principles if he chose them based on other principles, and so on. Ultimately, the decision to question and revise one's values and the decisions one makes in light of *this* decision are no more deserving of praise or blame than the decision to instinctively flee from danger; in either case, one can trace the decision in question back to circumstances and biological features over which the decision-maker did not have control.¹⁵

Returning to the question of entitlement, I believe this refutation of Dennett calls into serious question the intuition that one necessarily deserves a share of the value he has created through his own entrepreneurial skill. It may indeed be the case that Bill Gates has earned his millions through hard work and resourcefulness, and we may even concede that he made the conscious decision at some point in his life to be a hard-working, resourceful person. That being said, however, it does not seem as though he deserves to reap the benefits of his labor unless he also chose the principles in light of which he made this decision to become hard-working and resourceful. Even if we can say that he did choose to have these principles, moreover, we may nevertheless question whether he chose the principles in light of which *this* decision was made. Once again, we are inevitably led back to principles which Gates inherited at birth, and as noted earlier, I believe it would be a mistake to suggest that Gates *deserves* to enjoy the benefits of his labor simply because he had the good fortune of being born with traits that led him to become resourceful into circumstances favorable to this quality.

V. Conclusion

I would like to reiterate that we may accept Strawson's finding that there exists no true source of moral responsibility while nevertheless maintaining that we are justified in praising and

blaming others purely for utilitarian reasons, and a similar case can be made with respect to Nozick's Entitlement Theory. Indeed, while there may be serious reasons to doubt that one *deserves* a share of the value he has created simply because this value resulted from his own skill and resourcefulness, property rights of the kind defended by Nozick may nevertheless be worth preserving simply because these rights are instrumental to the success (or perhaps even the existence) of any democratic society. One must be careful, in other words, not to assume based on the argument presented above that property rights are completely without value and thus should be abolished. That being said, however, I believe Strawson's argument reveals the significant degree to which many of our intuitions regarding justice and entitlement may not be as infallible as we often assume. If we wish to maintain that one is morally responsible for his actions as well as morally entitled to that which he has earned, I believe we must find a way to address the many difficulties with which this argument presents us.

¹ Galen Strawson, "The Impossibility of Moral Responsibility," from *Free Will* 2nd ed., edited by Gary Watson (New York: Oxford University Press, 2004), page 212

² Strawson, 212-213

³ Strawson, 212-213

⁴ Strawson, 212-213

⁵ Strawson, 212-213

⁶ Robert Kane, "Responsibility, Luck, and Chance: Reflections on Free Will and Indeterminism," from

Free Will 2nd ed., edited by Gary Watson (New York: Oxford University Press, 2004), page 306

⁷ Strawson, 223

⁸ Robert Nozick, *Anarchy, State and Utopia* (New York: Basic Books, 1974), page 153

⁹ One might also question how we are to define the fair *transfer* of *held* things. This question, however, seems more easily answered than the question dealing with original appropriation, and thus it will not be considered here.

¹⁰ Nozick, 175

¹¹ Nozick, 176

¹² Once again, one might protest that the situation as I have described it is clearly deterministic. As was the case with moral responsibility, however, the possibility that the world is indeterministic does not seem to establish that one deserves that which he has created through his labor. After all, if my decision to work on a new invention rather than sleeping in was the result not of a conscious decision on my part, but rather of undetermined neural processes over which I did not have control, it is difficult to see how I can possibly *deserve* the benefits of my labor as Nozick would suggest.

¹³ Daniel Dennett, *Elbow Room: The Varieties of Free Will Worth Wanting* (Cambridge: The MIT Press, 1984), page 92

¹⁴ Dennett, 97-98

¹⁵ Once again, the argument is cast in deterministic terms. As we have seen, however, the argument remains quite compelling even if the universe is indeterministic.